

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Aging, retirement, and extra-terrestrials

As a lapsed biologist, I am fascinated by the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI). With billions and billions of stars and all the presumably habitable planets we know about, it would seem but a matter of time before we get a cosmic phone call. I can't help but wonder about the "little green men," or whatever that may be out there. I'm eager to know them.

How much, for instance, do we resemble each other? Are aliens' lives anything like ours? Do our communicants toil as we do through our lives? Do they retire from work but go on to die?

I can relate my interest in SETI to my own retirement from practice several years ago. Retirement is, as they say, a game-changer, perhaps particularly so for busy clinicians. Leaving the battlefield of practice is as big a shock as one will encounter, a phenomenon that speaks to the role of work in our culture, near all-consuming, and the common yardstick we use to measure ourselves and our worth. Retirement ends this calculus and has, accordingly, become known as the great leveler. No longer differentiated by our work, we join the lumpen masses.

It's not as if we don't know how to prepare for retirement. "Save money" is the common advice on the papers that pass a doc's desk, along with the admonition not to spend more than 4% of one's nest egg in a given year. There's more: Plan to travel. Resurrect old hobbies. Consider the advantages of condo living – no snow or grass to worry about and no upkeep. Further down the road, consider the promises of assisted living and even fewer responsibilities.

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We get less reliable help from the flickering screen. TV commercials show uncommonly hale, attractive retirees, active, often grinning and holding hands. They seem to owe their sunny circumstances to a bevy of recommended medications and supplements, even though they're generally pricey and unproven. At another TV break we learn about bathtubs that are easy to fill, stair assists that nearly work themselves, and urinary catheters that never snag. It seems peripheral to any real news.

We learn most about retirement from our colleagues. Some of these, perhaps tougher than the rest of us, push on and delay retiring, opting to pull the plow for a few more years. Others transition to new jobs such as assisting in the OR or doing shifts on the ward a la house staff. Others move to foreign climes to practice in less structured but still needy environments. A small but notable number of others go on to true second careers in photography, jazz singing, or whatever. In general, we can stay the hands on the clock for a time, but it's only temporary.

Ours is an age of propaganda. We hear that 50 is the new 40, 60 the new 50, and so on. Our technologically lengthened lives may provide us with a little more wiggle room when it comes to retirement, but don't count on it. Gerontologists identify the "young old" (65-75), the "middle old" (75-85) and the "old old" (85+) to describe the retirement-aging continuum. Prediction in a meaningful way is difficult, however, except to acknowledge that the common experience in retirement, whenever it comes, is the loss of the habits and accoutrements of adult life.

I had a film-director patient some years ago whose experience with breast cancer led her to make a film she called *The Other Side*. The gist of the work is that we all eventually leave the more usual roles in our lives to play other parts, moving to an "other side." Retirement is similar, and the transition into it is as momentous as patienthood.

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Our first reaction to retirement and changed circumstances is a mix of regret and relief. We are relieved to find that the burdens of practice have been lifted. Though our work lives may be waning, we're often still tangled up with achievement and ambition and still think in terms of what-might-have-been. What if we'd only pushed a little harder here, been more adept or luckier there? But the early angst of jostling between relief and regret doesn't last beyond a few years. The good news, sparse though it may be, is that retirement is not a single point, but a process.

It's as if we can paraphrase Mark Twain, commenting on Richard Wagner's music: "It isn't as bad as it sounds." Retirement can turn out like that, too. The truth is that we accommodate change and adapt, just as our bodies do, to new physiological circumstances. Thankfully, time blunts things, and the allure of prior, important career prospects ebbs. Our activities align to match our prospects. Perhaps we get used to playing the violin at midnight, or sleeping in, or we involve ourselves in other people's lives.

If retirement is a wake-up punch in our lives, advancing age promises real disruption. Aging, per se, is not an illness, but bodily functions slow, vulnerabilities mount, and debility from disease or decay is inevitable. Some of us rail against our circumstances and regard any diminution in our being with outrage. Others, like the French author Paul Claudel, seem unaffected and hold more buoyant views: "Eighty years old. No eyes left, no ears, no teeth, no legs, no wind! And when all is said and done, how astonishingly well one does without them."

Claudel's optimism is said to reflect "body transcendence," or an ability to move beyond reality. Successful aging has become a topic of vigorous debate but reflects the challenge of finding meaning in adverse circumstances.

Perhaps in pursuit of successful aging, many exceptional oldsters embark on new adventures with gusto, embracing an Ulyssean Journey, so named after Homer's depiction of Ulysses' fabled adventures in later life. Others — perhaps the majority — are less rambunctious but more serene, resting and savoring life's final chapters. Of course there's every possible scenario, with others, who are overwhelmed by their circumstances and put up with a sort of living death.

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Here's the tricky part: no one knows how he or she will do. And no one knows how much luck has to do with it. Nevertheless, two things stand out. First is the need for acceptance, which brings to mind the story of a Korean monk, aged and infirm, who had lived for decades in beggars' straitened circumstances. When an interviewer asked him if he was happy, the monk replied, "Very happy." The monk paused here, but moments later reaffirmed that he was content, adding, "I'm happy, too, to know that this is my Path. There is no other way."

Along with acceptance, courage is critical in aging and likely best determines how we will bear up when things go wrong. I like to remember the heroism called for in the Battle of Maldon, a thousand years ago when Anglo Saxons heroically tried to withstand a Viking invasion:

"Courage has got to be harder, Heart the stouter, spirit the sterner, as our strength weakens. Here lies our lord, cut to pieces, our best men in the dust. If anyone thinks of leaving this battle, he can howl forever."

There you are — the minimal ingredients for successful aging: courage and acceptance. There are likely others: focus, tenacity, good humor, luck. Never forget luck.

Back now to SETI. I'm still engaged thinking about extra-terrestrials. I want to know if they live and die. In between, I wonder if they retire.

I hope I get a chance to ask them.

References available upon request.

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